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ABSTRACT

Without fear, there is no courage, only ignorance of a situation's dynamics. Acknowledging a decision's liabilities promotes fear and forces the educational leader to exercise courage in formulating and carrying out a response to that situation. Courage alone is not enough, however, and could lead to professional suicide. Wisdom to marshal that courage within a certain context and knowledge of strategic decision making and timing are critical elements. Local education leaders may significantly enhance their ability to move their districts through a change process via a more thorough understanding of paradigms. Inability to recognize, appreciate, and adopt new paradigms early on places leaders in a reactionary position. What leaders actually perceive is determined by their particular paradigms. There is considerable risk for leaders infected with paradigm paralysis or trapped in a district immobilized by paradigm effect. Educators must become paradigm shifters or pioneers or support individuals filling these roles: freshly trained young people, older individuals shifting fields, mavericks, or tinkerers. Intuition, courage, and persistence are essential. Making the change process benefit students requires four basic components: getting administrative approval, obtaining broad community support, providing staff training, and institutionalizing the change. (Contains 21 notes.) (MLH)

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INFORMED COURAGE IN LOCAL LEADERSHIP: ESSENTIAL IN OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO CHANGE IN EDUCATION

By Dr. James H. VanSciver

Without fear, there is no courage, only ignorance regarding the dynamics of a situation. Acknowledging the liabilities of a decision promotes fear and forces the local education leader to exercise courage in both formulating and operationalizing a response to that situation. However, courage in and of itself is not sufficient to lead contemporary local school systems into the next century. Courage alone may result in professional suicide, a result not healthy for either the leader or the organization. Only through informed courage may local educational leaders guide their schools into the future.

Jayne Harning is a local school superintendent. Six months ago, her board of education asked for her recommendation regarding the promotion of inclusion of students with special needs in regular classrooms. Soon after this discussion was had during the public meeting, two outspoken and well-defined camps formed. Leading one side were the parents of gifted and talented students who felt this matter critical to the direction of the school system. Recommending for inclusion would further dilute the education of their already underserved children, they purported, and would force them to not only

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withdraw their students from the school system in a mass exodus, but would empower them to passionately organize against any future tax increase proposals for the schools.

In support of a recommendation for inclusion were parents of students identified with special needs who felt their children were being stigmatized through current practices which isolated them from the mainstream. Through their attorneys they threatened costly and lengthy litigation after a decision against their views.

Patrick Sumor has been the high school principal for eight years. He now finds himself amidst a major educational controversy in his school. Returning from a conference identifying educational reform initiatives, last year, one of the school's teachers began promoting the concept of block scheduling. Several senior staff vowed to fight any change to the traditional schedule and generated support from a group of outspoken parents. Meanwhile a critical mass of support has been growing for the new form of scheduling. Detecting this situation, the superintendent, six months ago, directed Sumor to forward a recommendation to him for the board of education. As the weeks have passed, Sumor has observed that the two groups have polarized themselves regarding this matter.

Seldom in history has public education in the United States come under such scrutiny, such criticism, as today. Berliner and Biddle (1995) propose reasons for such interest. "American schools are public institutions and are subject to public scrutiny and review. Public education eats up large chunks of tax dollars; educators and their supporters are forever calling for additional support funds; and nobody likes to pay taxes. And educators are a relatively passive group, often from working- or middle-class backgrounds, who have an embattled professional status and who are also likely to be women – a traditionally unempowered group. In sharp contrast, many of the critics have been males who were educated in private schools and who presently enjoy secure and prestigious positions." (1)

For school leaders, the question is how to respond to this steady stream of rhetoric regarding education. Why hasn't there been a more proactive strategy with which to meet this attack? Why aren't school leaders working to modify educational processes in order to more adequately respond to the changing needs of their contemporary institutions? This absence of leadership at the highest echelons of education, at the local, state, and national levels, has created a vacuum

into which special interest groups have moved, pushing their specific agendas on public schools. It will take courage, informed courage, on the part of educational leaders to overcome barriers to change in schools and provide expert guidance in having that change result in programs and processes which benefit students, not simply respond to the pressures of special interest groups.

Andrew Jackson once said, "One man with courage makes a majority." (2) At a time when the average tenure of local superintendents is 6.2 years (3), other pressures consume the local school chief's time and thoughts. Brubaker and Shelton coined the phrase, "the disposable leader syndrome." (4) In fact, a local school superintendent's status is much like that of a pitcher in baseball as described by Nolan Ryan. Writing about James "Catfish" Hunter, Ryan said, "In one of his first experiences, he pitched in relief of West Stock at a game in Cleveland in 1965. With two on and two out, he coaxed the next two batters to hit ground balls to shortstop. Bert Campeneris booted them both.

"The next thing he knew, manager Alvin Dark was on the way to the mound to remove him. 'I'm thinking, 'Why is he taking me out? I did

my job.'

"The lesson here, of course, is that in a team sport one man pays the price for everybody – the pitcher." (5) Is it any different for local school superintendents?

In the face of the reality of the demands of school leadership, educators still have choices. ". . . if there is a lesson from his (John F. Kennedy's) life, and from his death, it is that in this world of ours none of us can afford to be lookers-on, the critics standing on the sidelines." (6) "It was his (Kennedy's) conviction that a democracy with this effort by its people must and can face its problems, that it must show patience, restraint, compassion, as well as wisdom and strength and courage, in the struggle for solutions which are very rarely easy to find." (7)

So it is with education. How to undertake such direction of the institution at the local level is the question. Courage in and of itself is not sufficient. The wisdom necessary to operationalize that courage in the context of the situation and the knowledge of strategic decision making and timing are critical for informed courage in local school leadership to be realized.

Kuhn and Barker defined the term paradigm. Kuhn describes

paradigms as "accepted examples of actual scientific practice, examples which include law, theory, application and instrumentation together – (that) provide methods from which spring particular coherent traditions of scientific research." (8) Barker adds, "If you look up the word (paradigm) in the dictionary, you discover that it comes from the Greek paradeigma, which means 'model, pattern, example.' A paradigm is a set of rules and regulations that does two things: 1) it establishes or defines boundaries; 2) it tells you how to behave inside the boundaries so as to be successful." (9)

This is important in understanding how to overcome barriers to change since that resistance is termed by Kuhn and Barker to be paradigm paralysis. "More than a few organizations, which were very dominant in their prime, have succumbed and died of it. It is a 'hardening of the categories,' so to speak." (10) Local education leaders may significantly enhance their ability to move their districts through a change process as a result of a more thorough understanding of paradigms. An inability to recognize, appreciate, and adopt new paradigms early on, places local school leaders in a position of responding in a reactionary and costly manner, at the expense of their

clients, students, staff, and community members.

As example, one feature of the paradigm discussion impacting change is paradigm effect. "Paradigms act as physiological filters – that we quite literally see the world through our paradigms." (11) Consider the way educators respond to parental participation in schools. Despite the fact that the family unit has experienced a dramatic metamorphosis in the past three decades, many school people still rely on antiquated and ineffective strategies to promote parents' involvement in their children's education. And, when parents don't show, the typical reaction is, "They (parents) do not care." That's the paradigm effect in action. It does not work to improve parental participation in their children's education.

"Within the paradigm discussion, it means that any data that exists in the real world that does not fit your paradigm will have a difficult time getting through your filters. You will see little if any of it. The data that does fit your paradigm, not only will make it through the filter, but is concentrated by the filtering process thus creating an illusion of even greater support for the paradigm.

"Therefore what we actually perceive is dramatically determined by

our paradigms. What may be perfectly visible, perfectly obvious, to persons with one paradigm, may be, quite literally invisible to persons with a different paradigm." (12)

Berliner undertakes an examination of the reasons for the public's perception of public education. After a thorough investigation, he concludes, "So it is small wonder that many Americans have come to believe that education in our country is now in a deplorable state." (13) In reality, this perception is due mainly to the paradigm effect. Example after example could be rendered relating to this phenomenon. School and class size are two. Yet policy makers either ignore completely or look through a jaundiced eye at research that doesn't fit their idea of how education ought to work. Local school leaders would do well to arm themselves with tactics, which will counteract the impact of the paradigm effect on their schools. Much is at stake.

There is considerable risk for local school leaders infected with either paradigm paralysis or trapped in a district immobilized by the paradigm effect. It is the going back to zero rule. "By zero, I mean that regardless of what your position was with the old paradigm -- number one in market share, leader in technology, best reputation, you are now

back at the starting line with the new paradigm. Because of the change in leverage, the practitioners of the new paradigm have a chance to not just complete with but defeat the titans of the old paradigm.

"There is a kind of conceptual democracy to this rule because it suggests that no one stays on top forever. It is like an election where the vote is determined not by past successes but future promise. It is this rule that explains the success of some entrepreneurs who have done amazingly well against the established and powerful." (14)

As society's demands on schools travel through a period of change, those educators continuing to define their success using old rules and boundaries will be victimized by the going back to zero rule. In this era of accountability, increased parental participation mandates, changing demographics of student populations, decaying infrastructures, and graying workforce, never before has the need to understand and implement new paradigms been so great. When they do take place, the going back to zero rules takes hold. How does the local school leader respond in this environment?

There are two avenues for participation in this type of change process. Local education leaders may be either paradigm shifters or

paradigm pioneers or they may support individuals who fill those roles. The paradigm shifters are those who change the rules. Barker identifies four potential sources of these types of people in the change process. Young people fresh out of training have studied the current paradigm but never practiced it. They are not yet confined by the rules of the existing paradigm. Older people shifting fields are the second source of paradigm shifters. As these individuals are from a completely different background and experience, they, too, are free of the confines of the existing paradigm. Mavericks are insiders to the organization who understand that the present paradigm will not solve the problems. They will work to change paradigms. Finally, tinkerers don't recognize a special problem, only that it is their problem. At times they inadvertently create a new model with which to solve the existing problem. With this new model comes a new paradigm.

These paradigm shifters exist in school settings. Some are hired out of college or after changing careers. Others are sources of irritation for leaders because they just won't play by the rules. Still others are devoted staff who simply won't quit until they've discovered the right answer to the most perplexing question. All have value to education.

Astute local school leaders will recognize these individuals and their value to the school system. They will nurture and support them and assist them in their efforts to create new paradigms for schooling.

Paradigm pioneers follow the shifters. Logically this may be the most appropriate role for local educational leaders in the change process. While it may be difficult for them to create new paradigms because they are so intertwined with the prevailing model, they are more likely to recognize a new paradigm in time to take advantage of it. The paradigm pioneers enhance paradigm shifts. They "bring the critical mass of brainpower and effort and key resources necessary to drive the new rules into reality." (15) To do so will mean they will need to have three characteristics, essential to paradigm pioneers.

The first of these traits is intuition. But, as Kuhn points out, this is risky business. "The man who embraces a new paradigm at an early stage must often do so in defiance of the evidence provided by the problem-solving. He must, that is, have faith that the new paradigm will succeed with the many large problems that confront it knowing only that the older paradigm has failed with a few. A decision of that kind can only be made on faith." (16) This is perhaps the career altering

decision for the local school leader. When the prevailing processes call for data, for research, intuition requires action, which may be contrary to the aggregated information. How does one make such a decision?

The quality which allows local education leaders to operationalize intuition is called courage. "Remember, leaving one paradigm while it is still successful and going to a new paradigm that is a yet unproved looks very risky. But leaders, with this intuitive judgment, assess the seeming risk, determine that shifting paradigms is the correct thing to do, and, because they are leaders, instill the courage in others to follow them." (17)

With intuition and courage comes persistence. It takes time for a new paradigm to evolve, to be understood, to be fully operationalzied. "Getting in early and staying the course," (18) is of paramount importance to paradigm pioneers. Barker admits that these two principles are not consistent with the thinking of the United States financial industry, which wants safe, secure, quarterly returns. Neither do they parallel what the American culture expects of policy-makers in the public schools.

Local educational leaders would do well to understand how to move

an organization through a change experience. "To make a change is to understand a process, to comprehend building a bridge from idea, to action, to use. Changes are so common that individuals are asked to make and adapt to them everyday and yet, as creatures of habit, we resist change. In organizational settings, people rarely pay attention to the best way to make changes occur, or to consider if there are ways to make changes smoother, more efficiently, or with more sensitivity toward those people who will be affected by the change." (19)

Mundry and Hergert identify six critical understandings of a change process. (20) Change takes time and persistence, difficult to have constituents understand in a quickly changing world with diverse demands being placed on school systems. Individuals go through stages in the change process and have different needs at different stages. Important questions those individuals want answered are, "How will this change impact me? Will I have a job after the change? Will my job be different? Change strategies are most effective when they are chosen to meet people's needs. Keep in mind that it is people who will make or break the initiative. Administrative support and approval are needed for the change to occur. In order to get that support, the administrators

will need a thorough understanding not only of the need for the change but the process of the change as well. Developing a critical mass of support is just as important as developing administrative support. Barker refers to this as developing the vision community. And, an individual or committee must take responsibility for organizing and managing the change. It simply won't take place absent a passionate champion.

Everett Rogers (21) studied how an innovation diffuses through a group of people. He identified six adopter types, innovators, leaders, early majority, late majority, and resisters. Through his work with agricultural extension agents, farmers, and educators, he found that any representative population will have these types of adopters.

Innovators, while eager to try new ideas and open to change, are usually perceived as naïve and not well integrated into the social fabric of the organization. Leaders are more thoughtful and open to change and are trusted by others. The early majority are cautious and deliberate and tend to be followers not leaders. The late majority are skeptical but can be convinced through the use of peer pressure and administrative expectations. Resisters are suspicious and often opposed

to new ideas. They are usually not likely to influence others but enhance the quality of decision-making be asking difficult questions.

Mundry and Hergert point out that four critical assumptions must be understood about organizational change, change is a process, not an event; the individual needs to be the primary focus of interaction for change in the organization; change is a highly personal experience; and individuals experience developmental growth in feelings and skills as the process evolves.

People typically have seven types of concerns, awareness, in which they have little concern, informational, during which they seek general information; personal, in which they become uncertain about the demands of the change and their response to it; management, during which they focus on the processes and tasks of the innovation, consequence, when they consider the impact of the change, collaboration, when they begin to work with others, and refocusing, at which time they look to use the potential of the change in other ways. Understanding and supporting staff at each of these levels of oncern is or paramount importance for a school leader to inact an initiative in a local school system.

In making the change process benefit students, four basic components must be included in the activities. Getting administrative approval is critical, as is a broad base of community support. Without these two the potential for change is limited. Training and assistance for staff at each step in the process will enhance not only their technical expertise but their emotional reaction as well. Finally, for the change to be fully accepted, it must be institutionalized, either written into the curriculum, the budget, or the school system's policies.

Understanding these principles and processes of how change works in organizations and applying them to the various pressures being exerted on local school systems will provide school leaders with the technical knowledge necessary to be proactive in the changing and demanding culture in which we live.

Jayne Harning ponders these matters as she enters the board room for the public meeting in which she will make her recommendation regarding inclusion in her school district. As she takes her seat, her thoughts move to her teenage daughter, who just began her freshman year at an expensive private college in the Boston area. She knows that her son, now a high school junior, will also cause financial demands on

her through his choice of post-secondary education. As a single mother, this causes her to consider very carefully decisions impacting the security of her employment. The board president asks her for her recommendation. She opens the file, looks as the audience, and . . .

Meanwhile, Patrick Sumor sits as his desk considering his report to the superintendent. It is 5:30 P.M. He has just finished putting the file in final form. He knows that this matter will be controversial. On his desk sits a picture of his wife and their three children, ages six, four, and three months. They have just moved into a new home with a substantial mortgage but made the decision that his wife would not return to work until all three children are in school. His obligations are many. As he places his report in the district mail, he feels anxious about the repercussions of his recommendation. He has decided to . . .

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11. Ibid., p. 86.
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13. Berliner, p. 4.
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15. Ibid., p. 41.
16. Kuhn, p. 158.
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20. Ibid., p. 23.
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